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Blocked bodies: how racialised and gendered embodiment shapes entrepreneurial identity work

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Abstract

Purpose – Entrepreneurs who do not conform to the dominant identity of a White male start-up founder often encounter stigma, discrimination and challenges in gaining entrepreneurial legitimacy. To navigate these obstacles, they engage in Entrepreneurial Identity Work (EIW). While most research conceptualises EIW as a discursive and agentic process rooted in language and narrative, this study challenges that dominant framing by taking an embodied approach. It examines how racialised and gendered perceptions of the body shape the EIW of women and racial minority entrepreneurs and how structural constraints emerge through social interaction.

Design/methodology/approach – This exploratory qualitative study adopts a critical realist epistemological perspective and builds on ethnographic data from a nine-day start-up accelerator programme for women and racial minority entrepreneurs in the Netherlands. The data are analysed inductively and thematically.

Findings – The analysis identifies biased expectations, uncomfortable jokes and invalidating comparisons as key relational constraints on EIW. These constraints hinder women and racial minority entrepreneurs from establishing a legitimate entrepreneurial identity and prompt embodied responses in the form of diffusion or assertion.

Originality/value – This study contributes an underexplored embodied approach to EIW literature by problematising the field's predominant emphasis on discursive agency. Furthermore, the study contributes to literature on entrepreneurship by marginalised groups by providing accounts of embodied EIW of women and racial minority entrepreneurs. Finally, the ethnographic method further enhances this understanding by capturing nuanced details of these experiences in real-world interactions.

Keywords Entrepreneurial identity work, Minority entrepreneurship, Embodiment, Race, Gender

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Research drawing on the concept of identity work—defined as the "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising" of self-conceptions (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165; Brown, 2017; 2021)—is burgeoning within entrepreneurship scholarship (Radu-Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021). Within this sub-field, interpretivist and social constructivist epistemologies are prevalent, exploring how entrepreneurs construct and negotiate their identities through language, discourse, and narrative (Brown, 2021; Radu-Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021). While providing valuable insights into how entrepreneurs narratively construct their identities, it is largely grounded in discursive assumptions that conceptualise identity work as agentic and rooted in language, overlooking how it is also shaped through embodiment and social interaction (Kašperová and Kitching, 2014). In contrast to dominant discursive approaches to Entrepreneurial Identity Work (EIW), an embodied approach—grounded in feminist relational ontologies—emphasises that identity is not only constructed through language but also enacted and made materially present through social interactions (Butler, 2009; Sekimoto, 2012).

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The scarcity of studies employing an embodied approach to EIW is surprising, especially considering its potential to richly capture the lived experiences of marginalised entrepreneurs. Social identities such as race and gender namely "operate through visual markers on the body" (Alcoff, 2006, p. 6), which directly intersect with the somatic norms of entrepreneurship. The archetype of the entrepreneur as a "white male hero" (Ogbor, 2000, p. 607) not only represents a discursive ideal but also establishes a somatic norm for who is considered legitimate within entrepreneurial spaces. Entrepreneurs who do not adhere to this norm—including racialised, gendered, and intersectional entrepreneurs (Crenshaw, 1991)—face challenges such as stigma (Kašperová, 2021; van Amsterdam and van Eck, 2019), unequal access to resources (Brush *et al.*, 2019), and diminished entrepreneurial legitimacy, which means that they are not considered "desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574; Swail and Marlow, 2018). In response to these challenges, they engage in "compensatory identity work" (Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023, p. 2) by, for example, adopting masculine traits (Pugalia and Cetindamar, 2022) or using culturally resonant business names (Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023). While existing research offers insights into how entrepreneurial identities are narrated, its discursive focus overlooks how identity is also negotiated through embodied interaction—and tends to imply that marginalised entrepreneurs can overcome stigma by acquiring the "right" discursive resources (Fournier and Grey, 2000).

To contribute to this discussion, this study explores how the embodied experiences of gendered and racialised entrepreneurs shape their EIW. The study is guided by the research question: *How do racialised and gendered perceptions of women and racial minority founders' bodies influence their identity work in entrepreneurial settings*? To investigate this question, this exploratory qualitative study adopts a critical realist epistemological perspective. It draws on ethnographic data collected during a nine-day start-up accelerator in the Netherlands, designed specifically for underrepresented founders in the Dutch start-up ecosystem. The study inductively and thematically analyses the embodied experiences of women and racial minority entrepreneurs interacting with each other and stakeholders. This analysis highlights how three relational constraints—biased expectations, uncomfortable jokes, and invalidating comparisons—shape participants EIW through contrasting embodied responses in the form of diffusion—i.e. minimising or deflecting attention from somatic misalignment by downplaying discomfort—or assertion, i.e. actively challenging or reclaiming space.

The contributions of this study are threefold. First, it challenges dominant conceptualisations of EIW by foregrounding embodied dimensions that are often overlooked in discursive accounts. This shift moves beyond the prevailing emphasis on discursive agency and instead highlights how identity work is shaped through embodied, relational encounters that are deeply entangled with power and inequality. Second, the study empirically contributes to research on entrepreneurship among marginalised groups by demonstrating how embodied identity work emerges as a compensatory response to relational constraints that hinder legitimate identity attainment. It enhances our understanding of how somatic norms and perceptions of the body shape entrepreneurial experiences. Finally, this study contributes methodologically by adopting an ethnographic approach to capture detailed accounts of the lived, embodied experiences of entrepreneurs in real-world interactions. It addresses recent calls to move beyond examining the identity work of individual entrepreneurs and toward a deeper exploration of how EIW is shaped through interactions with others (Radu-Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021).

The next section delves into the theoretical foundations underpinning this study, examining both discursive and embodied approaches to EIW, and how visibly demarcated social identities, such as race and gender, influence EIW.

Theoretical framework

A discursive approach to EIW

The concept of identity—the answer to the question "who am I?" or "who are we?"—has steadily grown in popularity among entrepreneurship scholars over the last decades,

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prompting several researchers to meta-analyse the studies on entrepreneurship and identity (Radu-Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021; Mmbaga *et al.*, 2020; Wagenschwanz, 2021). These reviews illustrate that the entrepreneurial identity literature can be broadly organised around two contrasting ontological convictions—also present in broader identity literature: the first considers identity as relatively fixed and unchangeable, whereas the second holds that identity is extremely fluid and processual. Promoting the latter perspective, Leitch and Harrison contended in 2016 that the research focus in entrepreneurial identity studies "must shift from identity *per se* to the processes of identity formation" (p. 182). They argue that "only by understanding the dynamics of identity formation through *identity work*, is it possible to relate identity to entrepreneurial outcome" (p. 179, italics added). A recent review by Radu-Lefebvre *et al.* (2021) on entrepreneurial identity literature indeed highlights a burgeoning number of studies that cast entrepreneurial identity as process and draw on the concept of identity work.

Because identity work focusses on what people *do* rather than who they *are*, it is defined as "people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). The concept is further defined and described by Brown (2017), who identifies different approaches to identity work, including discursive, dramaturgical, symbolic, sociocognitive, and psychodynamic approaches. Moreover, Brown (2021) finds that the identity work perspective is loosely characterised by five main assumptions, including that (1) selves are reflexive and identities actively worked on, both in soliloquy and social interaction; (2) identities are multiple, fluid, and rarely fully coherent; (3) identities are constructed within relations of power, (4) identities are not helpfully described as either positive or authentic; and (5) identities are both interesting *per se* and integral to processes of organising.

Interpretivist and social constructivist epistemologies are most dominant in the field of entrepreneurship and identity work. These studies usually employ a discursive approach to EIW, viewing identity as shaped by language, discourse, and narrative (Brown, 2021; Radu-Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021). Drawing on the work of philosophers such as Foucault and Wittgenstein, these studies use discourse-oriented research methods—such as interviews, discourse analysis, and narrative analysis—to explore "how entrepreneurs narratively construct and negotiate their identities" (Kašperová and Kitching, 2014, p. 439). Scholars advocate for discourse-analytic methods because they reject the idea that identity is determined by biological characteristics, thereby "minimizing the danger of portraying a particular identity as the 'essence' of an individual or collective" (Ybema *et al.*, 2004, p. 304). Further, EIW scholarship is sensitive to the ways identities are constructed within relations of power, and studies that take a discursive approach to EIW explore how people's identities are "manipulated, reprogrammed and subject to concertive controls through totalizing discourses" (Brown, 2021, p. 12).

That said, its focus on individual language yields an emphasis on the agency entrepreneurs exercise when constructing their identities and seeking legitimacy. As Fournier and Grey (2000) argue, this reliance on discursive agency risks suggesting that individuals can shape their identities at will, as long as they access the "right" discursive resources. Such assumptions not only downplay structural constraints but also echo a broader conceptualisation of entrepreneurship as a self-determined and meritocratic process—one that overlooks how inequality and embodied difference shape entrepreneurial possibilities (Martinez Dy, 2020; Ozasir Kacar and Essers, 2019).

An embodied approach to EIW

To address these conceptual limitations, some scholars have turned to an embodied approach to EIW, though it remains less prevalent in the field. This approach adopts critical realist, pragmatist, or phenomenological epistemologies, viewing identities as not only shaped by social norms, language, and discourse but also influenced by material and natural conditions,

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structures, and external social forces (Kašperová *et al.*, 2018; Marks and O'Mahoney, 2014). Drawing on the work of embodiment philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Hull (2006) and relational social ontologies (e.g. Butler, 2009), this perspective emphasises that identity is not merely constructed through language but also "becomes materially present and embodied" through social interactions (Sekimoto, 2012, p. 228). As a result, methodologies aimed at understanding lived, embodied experiences in detail, such as ethnography or body mapping, are well-suited to this approach. While acknowledging—in line with a discursive approach to EIW—that identity is largely expressed through narrative and shaped by discourse instead of biological characteristics, proponents of the embodied approach argue that "moderate forms of essentialism" are necessary for a deeper understanding of identities that emerge from embodiment (Kašperová and Kitching, 2014, p. 439). An embodied approach to EIW places less emphasis on agency, focusing instead on structural conditions that can either enable, constrain, or discourage an individual's attainment of a legitimate entrepreneurial identity. An embodied approach thus finds that power is embedded not only in social structures (e.g. discourse) but also in material and personal structures (e.g. embodiment), with the entrepreneurial experience being influenced by these forms of power (Kašperová *et al.*, 2018). Table 1 provides an overview of the key differences between a discursive and an embodied approach to EIW.

This embodied perspective is especially valuable for examining the identity work of marginalised entrepreneurs because their experiences are deeply shaped by the material realities of their bodies, which will be explored further in the next section.

Race, gender, and embodied EIW

An embodied approach to EIW begins by analysing individuals' relationships with the material and social world, rather than focusing solely on the individual subject (Slatman, 2023). Butler's relational social ontology supports this perspective, arguing that in a hierarchical society, bodily interdependence renders some individuals more vulnerable than others (Butler, 2009, 2015; Tyler, 2019). They explain that "the body is constituted through

Table 1. Overview of a discursive and an embodied approach to EIW

Aspect	Discursive approach to EIW	Embodied approach to EIW
Epistemologies	Interpretivism, social constructivism	Critical realism, pragmatism, phenomenology
Philosophical foundations	Foucault, Wittgenstein	Merleau-Ponty, Hull, Butler
Focus of identity construction	Identity is constructed through language, discourse, and narrative	Identity is constructed not only by discourse but also shaped by material and bodily experiences
Research methods	Discourse analysis, interviews, narrative analysis; methods focusing on language and narrative	Ethnography, participant observation, body mapping; methods focusing on lived experience and embodiment
View on essentialism	Rejects essentialism; avoids portraying identity as an essence	Recognises moderate forms of essentialism as necessary for understanding embodiment in identity
Perspectives on power	Focuses on how identity is shaped by discourse and power relations, including manipulation and control through totalising discourses	Power is embedded in social, material, and personal structures, and the embodied experience is influenced by them
Agency vs. structure	Emphasis on individual agency in identity work	Emphasis on how material and structural conditions enable or constrain identity work

Source(s): Author's own work

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perspectives it cannot inhabit . . . As located beings, we are always elsewhere, constituted in a sociality that exceeds us" (Butler, 2015, p. 97). This notion underscores the relational nature of identity work: identities are shaped and perceived within social contexts, relying on recognition and validation by others (Skovgaard-Smith *et al.*, 2020).

It is precisely this relational nature of identity work that renders an embodied approach to EIW helpful in understanding the experiences of entrepreneurship of marginalised groups. Feminist and anti-racist scholars explore how personal embodiment—including how their body is perceived by others—shapes the lived experiences of gendered and racialised groups in Western and patriarchal contexts. For instance, the ability of male rugby players in the UK to embody hegemonic masculinity influences their integration into organisations (Giazitzoglu, 2024). Similarly, in racist encounters the racialised body is found to be blocked—"restricted in movement by ascriptions of others onto your body"—and dehumanised (Oberstadt, 2021, pp. 34–35). Consequently, those diverging from dominant somatic entrepreneurial norms need to engage in EIW to counteract socio-cultural biases and establish entrepreneurial legitimacy (Swail and Marlow, 2018), i.e. be considered "desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). For instance, recent studies highlight that women immigrant entrepreneurs in technology often adopt masculine traits and emphasise their expertise (Pugalia and Cetindamar, 2022), while Black male immigrant entrepreneurs in the UK may acquire "symbolic Whiteness" by using culturally resonant business names (Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023, p. 8).

Much of the research that uses an embodied approach to EIW, however, focuses on the identity work of disabled entrepreneurs (Hidegh *et al.*, 2023; Jammaers and Williams, 2023; Jammaers and Ybema, 2022; Jammaers and Zanoni, 2020; Kašperová *et al.*, 2018; Kašperová, 2021). For example, a recent study on the identity work of entrepreneurs with dwarfism finds that "the bodies of artists with dwarfism are engrained with a historically transferred status that cannot easily be escaped", which intrudes upon their identity work (Jammaers and Ybema, 2022, p. 15). Though less studied in entrepreneurship research, race and gender similarly exemplify social identities that emerge from embodiment, referred to as our "penultimate visible identities" (Alcoff, 2006, p. 6). These identities are largely marked on the body, making them nearly impossible to "rise above" (Alcoff, 2006, p. xi) or to "strategise away" (van Merriënboer *et al.*, 2025). As such, this study aims to investigate how racialised and gendered perceptions of women and racial minority founders' bodies influence their identity work. Before detailing the study's methodology, the next section introduces the research context.

Methodology

Research context

For several decades the Dutch government has been investing in the development of an entrepreneurial ecosystem to foster tech entrepreneurship and tech-based start-ups. More recently, however, the lack of gender and racial diversity among start-up founders was recognised as an obstacle to sustainable growth of the entrepreneurial landscape (Techleap, 2023a). There is, indeed, very little somatic diversity in Dutch innovative entrepreneurship. The Netherlands employs women in technology roles at rates well below the European average (Techleap, 2023b) and although residents with non-Western immigrant backgrounds represent 14.5% of the total Dutch population, only around 7% of start-up founders are non-Western immigrants (Henz *et al.*, 2022). Studies show how Dutch women entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs of colour are generally "Othered" in a majority White and masculine entrepreneurial landscape and face difficulties in, for example, accessing finance and social networks (Essers and Tedmanson, 2014; van Merriënboer *et al.*, 2025).

The general attitude toward hierarchies of race and gender in the Netherlands is best explained through the concept of "White innocence". White innocence is described by Wekker (2016) as a passionate denial of the Dutch colonial violence, a violence that lasted for over

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400 years, and its far-reaching consequences in today's society. One of these consequences is that even though approximately 25% of the Dutch population was born abroad or has one or more parents who were born abroad (CBS, 2023) the Dutch population is still homogenously and repressively represented by "Dutchness as whiteness" (Wekker, 2016, p. 7). White innocence functions through not-knowing as well as not wanting to know. Wekker (2016) claims that it is precisely because White Dutch people tend not to understand the racist world in which they live, that they are able to fully benefit from its racial hierarchies. Luyendijk summarised this attitude as: "I mean well, so I must be innocent" (Luyendijk, 2022, p. 157). As such, Dutch society is permeated by "everyday racism" (Essed, 2018), defined as "a modern form of prejudice that characterises the racial attitudes of many whites who endorse egalitarian values, who regard themselves as non-prejudiced, but who discriminate in subtle, rationalizable ways" (Dovidio and Gaertner, 2004, p. 55).

Data collection

Given the limited existing research on embodied identity work among marginalised entrepreneurs, this study adopts an exploratory approach aimed at generating in-depth insights into how racialised and gendered perceptions of the body influence EIW. Exploratory research is particularly well-suited for contexts where theoretical understanding is limited, and rich qualitative data is needed to uncover complex social processes (Stebbins, 2001). The study is grounded in critical realist epistemology and incorporates ethnographic fieldwork conducted over nine days during a Dutch start-up accelerator programme for founders from underrepresented backgrounds—a setting where relational dynamics and identity negotiations are especially visible. In critical realist terms, ethnography allows for examining the empirical layer (what can be observed) and "how entrepreneurs, as embodied agents, interact with their natural, practical, and social environments" (Kašperová and Kitching, 2014, p. 447), making it particularly well-suited for understanding the embodied identity work of women and racial minorities in entrepreneurial settings. Previous research has also demonstrated the value of ethnographic methods in studying entrepreneurial identities and identity performances (Bruni *et al.*, 2004; Down and Reveley, 2004; Giazitzoglu and Down, 2017).

The accelerator programme took place for the first time in 2021. The programme was organised by the Dutch chapter of a global platform for diversity and inclusion in technology entrepreneurship. Participation in the accelerator programme was fully sponsored by the organising party. The aim of the programme was to provide underrepresented founders with entrepreneurial support and improved access to the Dutch entrepreneurial ecosystem and investment landscape, and as such reduce the funding gap in the Netherlands. The programme comprised nine full days over the course of three months and consisted of group workshops as well as one-on-one mentoring sessions covering topics such as growing a venture and negotiating fundraising. For a condensed overview of programme activities, see Table 2. Five entrepreneurs participated in the programme. I have anonymised them by giving them pseudonyms in this paper. The participants were Nisha and Sebie (Black women), Anna and Hazel (White women), and James (Black man). The operational team consisted of the project lead, intern, and researcher. More than twenty trainers and mentors of various backgrounds contributed to the programme, some of whom will appear in the empirical vignettes below. Although the programme was conducted entirely in English, Dutch-speaking participants occasionally conversed in Dutch among themselves; as I am fluent in both languages, I was able to understand and engage in these discussions when needed.

As an overt researcher in the accelerator programme, I negotiated access to group workshops and social events with the team lead. In exchange, I provided operational support and contributed to the programme's evaluation report. Throughout the fieldwork, I mostly positioned myself in the background, taking detailed observational notes and minimising direct engagement with participants during programme activities. The participants were primarily preoccupied with the demands of the accelerator programme and paid relatively little

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Table 2. Condensed version of programme activities

Day	Programme activities
Day 1	• Introduction meeting with introductory business presentations • Speed dating between programme participants • Workshop on product-market fit • Social event: dinner
Day 2	• Peer coaching session • Q&A with experienced founder • Reflection session
Day 3	• Online workshop on beachhead marketing
Day 4	• Opening session • Workshop on VC fundraising • Social event: group lunch • Q&A with experienced founder • Workshop on entering international markets
Day 5	• Workshop on pitching
Day 6	• Workshop on growth marketing • Workshop on valuation • Workshop on scaling operations
Day 7	• Workshop on strategic sales • Q&A with experienced investor • Q&A with experienced investor
Day 8	• Workshop on negotiating with investors • Workshop on due diligence
Day 9	• Evaluation interviews with programme participants • Workshop on smart capital investors • Workshop on corporate partnerships • Social event: closing drinks

Source(s): Author's own work

attention to my presence. At the start of my fieldwork, my notes were broad and unstructured, aiming to capture as much as possible, including participants, space, gestures, and dialogue. Over time, as I iterated between my observations and academic literature, my approach became more focused, with an emphasis on documenting social interactions where embodied differences were expressed, articulated, or acted upon (Emerson *et al.*, 2011). While some notes were processed into digital ethnographic fieldnotes during breaks, such as lunch, I revisited and expanded on all information in the evenings. This method resulted in 61.5 h of observations recorded across approximately 100 pages of detailed fieldnotes. Additionally, on the programme's final day, I conducted interviews with each participant to gather insights into their experiences.

Knowledge generated from qualitative research is inherently "situated, co-constructed, and historically and socially located" (Reich, 2021, p. 575). Especially when studying marginalised populations, researchers need to thoroughly analyse and incorporate the relationship between the researcher and the researched in different phases of the research process (Essers, 2009). Rightly so, a young White woman researcher studying and interpreting the experiences and perspectives of Black research participants raises ethical and epistemological concerns. However, while my positionality as a White researcher inevitably framed the lens through which I interpreted the data, my minimal active participation during fieldwork reduced opportunities for significant power dynamics to unfold during interactions. Moreover, while participants faced marginalisation based on race and/or gender, they also occupied privileged positions as highly educated professionals, with all holding university degrees and some having completed PhDs. This shared academic and professional background reduced the social distance between us and meant that participants were not inherently vulnerable in the research setting.

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Nevertheless, I remained critically aware throughout the entire research process that I have power in imputing my own meaning and interpretations on the research participants (Barron, 1999), acknowledging the risk of centring my own (White) voice instead of prioritising the voices of the participants and challenging white hegemony (Chadderton, 2012). To mitigate these risks, I maintained a reflexive journal to document and interrogate these moments throughout the research process, and I aimed to analyse and interpret both the participants' voices and my own as dynamic and plural, rather than treating them as "authentic" or absolute (Soedirgo and Glas, 2020; Chadderton, 2012). Specifically, I aim to follow Zilber and Zanoni's (2022) approach in creating an ethnographic text that incorporates a "second voice" to "reflexively expose the backstage of the study, the cyclic, if not chaotic, research process, and the ultimate inability to capture complex reality through clear-cut explanations" (p. 396). Consequently, the findings are presented through detailed descriptions of participants' experiences and interactions which are complemented with more reflexive interpretations of the data.

Data analysis

As is common with ethnographic fieldwork, data collection and analysis were interlinked (O'Reilly, 2011). In this case, I entered the field with a broad interest in how marginalised entrepreneurs construct legitimate entrepreneurial identities. Soon, I experienced what Gubrium and Holstein (2014) would classify as "analytic inspiration": empirical excitement that yielded a "leap in perspective that produces a new way of seeing things" (p. 47). On the programme's first day, the participants were joined by Thomas, a White, middle-aged man who stepped in for his co-founder, Anna, who was unavailable. Throughout the day, references were made to Thomas's seemingly non-marginalised position, highlighting a noticeable contrast between him and the other participants. Both Thomas and the participants appeared aware that his masculine Whiteness shielded him from the underrepresentation and marginalisation the others experienced. These observations prompted me to iterate between data collection and reading literature on materiality and embodiment in identity work. This shift in perspective served as an analytic starting point that sharpened my research focus on embodiment, guiding subsequent data collection and analysis while remaining open to emerging themes and alternative interpretations.

The coding process was done manually and involved repeated readings of the data, marginal annotations, writing of vignettes on key social situations, and the development of visualisations of the data structure through mind mapping, without the use of any software. This process unfolded in two distinct phases. During the first phase, right after returning from the field, I adopted a structured approach to data analysis, employing a thematic and inductive methodology moving from first-order categories to overarching aggregate themes (Gioia, 2021). Specifically, I identified observations where racialised and gendered embodiment was either directly or indirectly mentioned, applying labels that closely reflected the data. While the coding was largely inductive, it was guided by sensitising concepts from existing literature on embodiment, race, and gender, which provided a lens to interpret the data without imposing preconceived categories. The labels applied ranged from single sentences—such as James' comment about ensuring his diverse team did not come across as "angry Black men and women"—to longer vignettes detailing social interactions among stakeholders (Augustine, 2014). This initial process yielded nine first-order categories. Next, I grouped these categories into second-order themes by identifying relationships and patterns, guided by an embodied approach to EIW. This approach considered both material and bodily experiences and the ways in which gendered and racialised bodies were perceived by others. For example, categories such as "not being taken seriously by majority group members" (biases) and "being expected to assimilate to the majority group" (expectations) were grouped under the second-order theme "biased expectations". Through this process, I developed three second-order themes: biased

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expectations, uncomfortable jokes, and invalidating comparisons. Together, these themes exemplify relational constraints on legitimate identity attainment.

Following the first phase, which focused on the relational constraints on legitimate identity attainment, reviewer feedback emphasised the importance of investigating how participants actively responded to the constraints I had identified, which prompted me to expand the analysis and focus the second phase on uncovering these embodied identity work responses. To do this, I revisited key excerpts where participants navigated relational constraints and examined how they engaged with these challenges in both their discursive and embodied practices. This involved a more granular coding of participants' verbal reflections and observed behaviours. Through iterative comparison across cases, three patterned responses emerged. First, participants frequently articulated a growing awareness of the persistent and structural nature of the constraints they faced—this was coded as "recognising the inescapability of constraints". Second, many participants adopted strategies that sought to downplay discomfort or deflect attention from their bodily misalignment with dominant norms. These responses were grouped under the theme of "diffusion", which emerged as the most salient pattern across the data. Third, although less frequent, I identified moments where participants actively challenged or resisted exclusionary norms. These instances were coded as "assertion". However, such moments were often limited by structural constraints, highlighting the bounded nature of agentic responses within unequal systems.

To enhance analytical rigour, I engaged in informal peer debriefing with academic colleagues experienced in interpretive research, which helped me reflect on alternative interpretations and strengthen the coherence of my thematic analysis. The complete coding structure is presented in Figure 1.

Findings

The findings are presented through a description of three relational constraints on legitimate identity attainment—biased expectations, uncomfortable jokes, and invalidating comparisons—and the identity work responses to these constraints in the form of diffusion or assertion. These themes are presented through ethnographic vignettes and supporting quotes which include the accelerator participants, but also other actors such as myself, the workshop facilitators, programme leads, and experienced investors and founders. Supportive data for each theme can be found in Appendix.

Before we move to a description of each theme, the next section introduces the accelerator setting and participants in more detail.

Setting the scene

Five start-up founders participated in the accelerator programme. All of them are in their early to mid-thirties and based in the Netherlands. They are Anna, Hazel, James, Nisha, and Sebie. Anna is a White Dutch woman. She used to be a venture capital (VC) investor and now co-runs a start-up that is developing a communication app. She wears colourful clothing, often with matching large dangling earrings. Hazel is a White Dutch-American woman. Together with her partner, she runs an administrative start-up for medical professionals. She is tall and dresses fashionably. James is a Black man. He was born in Nigeria and grew up in the United Kingdom, South Africa, and Nigeria. He is the chief executive officer of a skill-matching platform for developers in Africa. He is a large man who dresses smart, often wearing colourful polos and shirts. Nisha is born in Surinam and moved to the Netherlands at nine years old. She is a scientist and co-founded a medical technology company after obtaining her PhD in science. She dresses smart, often in a dress or skirt with high heels. Finally, there is Sebie, a Black woman. She was born in Djibouti and moved to Sweden as a child, before moving to the United Kingdom and finally to the Netherlands. Through a renowned accelerator programme, she found two co-founders with whom she is developing an educational technology platform.

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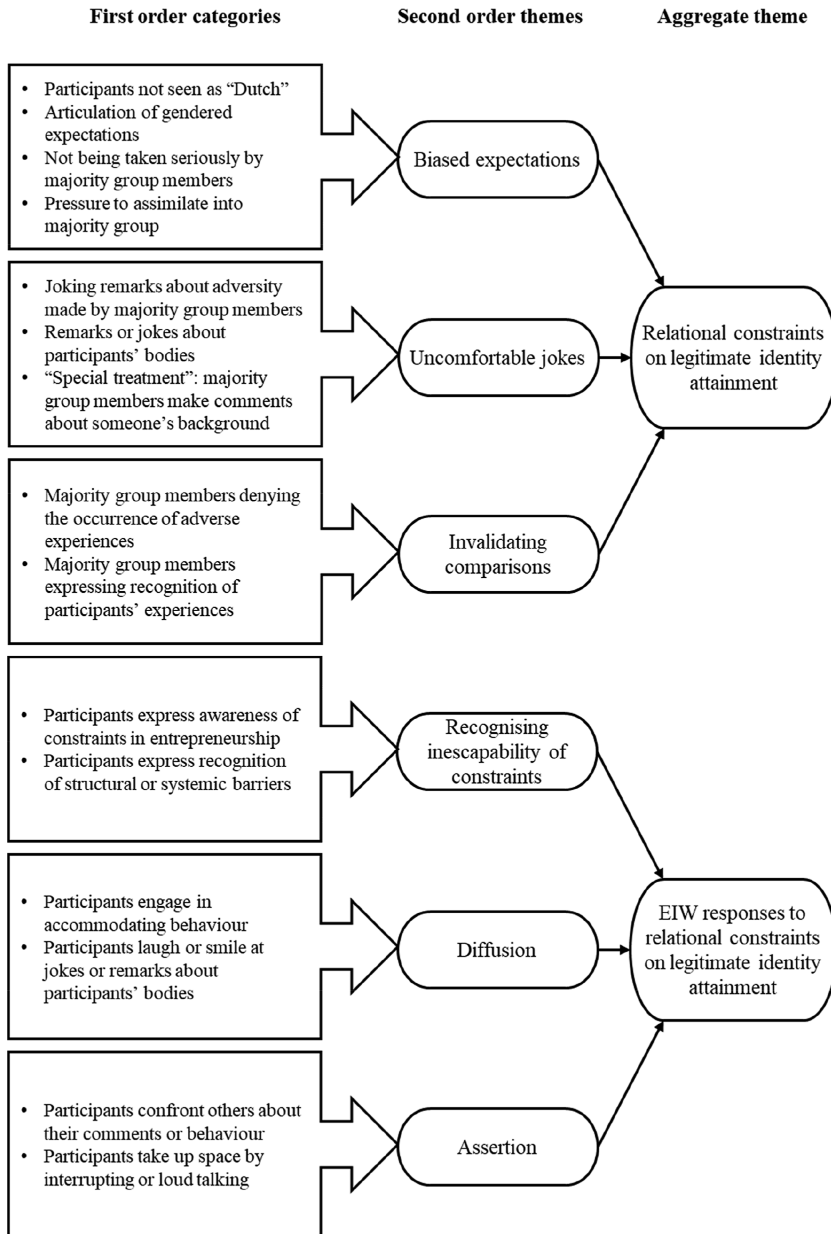

Figure 1. Data structure. Source: Author's own work

Sebie wears comfortable and simple clothing; denim jeans, a shirt, and Converse trainers, for example.

The workshops are run in three different spaces. They are all co-working offices in the Netherlands, in Rotterdam and Amsterdam. While navigating these spaces, I was quickly struck by the abundance of typical start-up co-working props: a small fridge filled with sodas

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and beers, soundproof phone booths lining the hallway, a playroom with table tennis and foosball, a lounge area with a PlayStation and a box of Rubik's cubes, and a small ornament that displays the text "Work Hard Play Hard." The people that occupy the working spaces are predominantly young White men dressed casually, often in a t-shirt, denim jeans, and trainers. Occasionally, someone will bring their dog to one of the office spaces.

Throughout the programme days, the participants meet facilitators, trainers, and experienced start-up founders for mentorship talks and workshops. Schedules are tailor-made for individual participants, meaning that not all participants are always present at the workshops and participants sometimes leave workshops halfway through for one-on-one trainings. Further, the programme is hybrid, with some of the one-on-one discussions being online and some in-person at the different venues.

Relational constraints on legitimate identity attainment

Biased expectations. The first relational constraint arises when participants encounter biased expectations rooted in racialised and gendered perceptions of their bodies. For instance, racial minority participants often express or demonstrate that they are not perceived as Dutch by members of the majority group. One common example is the assumption that these participants do not speak Dutch fluently, likely due to their racial background. This bias is illustrated in the following vignette from a social interaction during a growth marketing workshop on the sixth day of the programme:

> As the programme lead was running late, I welcomed the workshop facilitators—two middle-aged Dutch White women—to the venue. We entered the training room, and the facilitators began setting up their materials and displaying their slides. Anna and Nisha were seated at the large table in the room. While the facilitators discussed their training content in Dutch, Nisha interrupted, saying (in Dutch), "I also speak Dutch, by the way; you might not see it." One of the trainers quickly responded, "Oh, I'm sorry!" In the brief silence that followed, I sensed a hint of discomfort from Anna and the workshop facilitators.

This is not the only time Nisha refers to not being seen as Dutch. Similarly, when introducing herself prior to a workshop on pitching on day five, Nisha says: "I feel Dutch, but I am not sure whether the Dutch see me this way."

Further, throughout the programme, both majority group members and participants express gendered expectations rooted in bias. For example, during an informal conversation I had with Thomas, Anna's White male co-founder, he said that he found men to be better at "hiding their insecurity" than women. In another instance, an experienced White woman founder advises participants that women "never" include the monetary target they want to fundraise in their investor slide decks, though she suggests they should "put it on the first page of their deck." The following vignette further illustrates these gendered expectations, with James sharing his views on how women in entrepreneurial settings should (or should not) dress:

> After wrapping up a Q&A session with an experienced investor, James turns to Anna to ask about her previous work at a particular venture capital office, mentioning that he had two meetings there. Anna asks who he met with, but James can't recall the name. When she prompts him to describe the person, James replies, "It was a woman, but dressed like a man." Laughter fills the room, and Sebie shouts, "I'm wearing men's clothes too!" James smiles, raises his hands in a playful gesture of apology, and laughs along with the group.

Participants in the programme also express feeling dismissed by majority group members due to biased expectations. Hazel, for instance, mentions twice that "as a woman," she is often not taken seriously, whether by investors or by her clients, who are frequently male surgeons.

In summary, participants face biased expectations based on racialised and gendered perceptions of their bodies, which complicates their EIW. These biases manifest in several ways, including Dutch racial minority participants being perceived as "non-Dutch", gendered expectations about what women entrepreneurs should and should not do, being dismissed by

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majority stakeholders, and the pressure to assimilate into the majority group. The next section addresses a second relational constraint participants encountered during the programme: uncomfortable jokes.

Uncomfortable jokes. The second relational constraint participants face in their EIW is the occurrence of joking remarks about race or gender. For example, on the first day of the accelerator programme, Anna was unable to attend the programme activities and her (White male) co-founder Thomas joined instead. When Thomas is asked about the composition of his founding team, he smiles and says: "Well, you can all see that I am not an underrepresented founder!" Several people in the room smile or giggle after his remark. In the evening, a similar occurrence takes place:

> A dinner is held, bringing together the participants and select programme facilitators. A woman facilitator of the programme is delivering an informal speech. She reflects on her own background as an underrepresented founder and says she recognises the "pain" these founders are put through. She goes on to say: "This is why I am very proud to see all of you here" when Thomas puts his hand in front of his mouth and fakes a cough as to direct attention to his presence. Many people seated at the table laugh. The facilitator who is holding the speech smiles and says that she is happy that Thomas is there as well to "join the conversation," and she continues her speech.

Similar jokes are made during the programme. For example, during end-of-the-day reflections someone refers to a workshop facilitator they met that afternoon as "a role model who was all about empowering women", upon which James response, "I guess after I've left?", evoked laughter from many people in the room.

Moreover, jokes and remarks regarding James' larger body are recurrent throughout the data [1], reinforcing racialised stereotypes of tall Black men as threatening (Hester and Gray, 2018). On day four, a Q&A session with an experienced founder started with a round of introductions. Sebie is sitting next to James. When she is asked to introduce herself, she continuously moves her body backward and forward to look past James and make eye contact with the trainer. Other participants notice this and laugh, and the programme lead calls out "you're a big guy!" to James twice. James laughs along, and the round of introduction continues. On day six of the programme a similar situation takes place. This time, it is Nisha who is sitting next to James. When the workshop facilitator starts his introduction, Nisha asks James to switch places with her because he is blocking her sight. Anna responds to this by saying: "James has a huge back!" This evokes laughter from the room, including James himself.

Finally, besides jokes about race, gender, or body proportions, the data illustrates that women and racial minority entrepreneurs receive special treatment: they are confronted with remarks or comments about their gender or racial minority background where members of majority groups do not receive these remarks. For example, during a workshop on product-market fit, the workshop facilitator asks participants about their nationalities by way of an icebreaker exercise. When James mentions he is Nigerian, the workshop facilitator responds: "That is so cool. I have been there before." Other participants with European nationalities do not receive a similar response.

Overall, perceptions of racialised and gendered bodies evoke uncomfortable jokes or specific remarks about participants' background. Whereas these jokes and remarks might relieve tensions and support social cohesion, at the same time they point out differences between participants and others, possibly impeding legitimate identity attainment for women and racial minority entrepreneurs. A final relational constraint found in the data is invalidating comparisons, which will be discussed in the next section.

Invalidating comparisons. The third relational constraint visible in the data is the articulation of invalidating comparisons. This theme includes occurrences of majority group members denying the existence of adverse experiences for participants due to their race or gender, and majority group members articulating recognition with participants despite possible differences. Both of these themes occur in the following vignette describing a social

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interaction during a start-up valuation workshop on day six. The workshop is facilitated by Alessandro, a White, Italian, male investor:

> Anna asks Alessandro whether he has advice specifically for underrepresented founders who need to negotiate with White men. He responds that he never experienced any discrimination, so he cannot give any advice on that. Shortly after, James asks him how he should present himself on stage when he is not "the same as people normally on stage." Alessandro replies that you should focus on building your business, and things will work out. Anna chips in again and says that "if you look at the statistics", only a small amount of funding goes to underrepresented founders and thus it is not about "knowing how to build a business" but about "knowing how to make it look." Alessandro then subsequently refers to his own experience of coming to the Netherlands as an Italian immigrant, but still managing to raise funds at 23 years old. He says: "I did it, it's possible."

In other instances, trainers and facilitators in the programme similarly deny the existence of adverse experiences yielding from gendered or racialised embodiment. For example, when James explains he struggles to connect to large Dutch customers because of his Nigerian background, one of the trainers says that for potential clients, it is "not about who they are speaking to" but about "the story you tell".

A second way in which invalidating comparisons manifest in the observations is when majority stakeholders articulate recognition with participants, despite not sharing similar gendered or racialised identity markers. For example, when Nisha confronted the workshop trainers that she, in fact, spoke Dutch, Anna—a White Dutch woman—replies: "I know how you feel, people always think I am foreign as well." Similarly, when in the pitching workshop Nisha mentions that she "feels Dutch" but is not sure whether the "Dutch see her this way", she continues to say that this does not matter to her because "home is where my family is." The trainer, Patrick, a Dutch White male, responds to this saying: "I recognise this. I also value humans more than their surroundings." Patrick also appears in the following vignette, where he similarly seems to emphasise sameness with the participants:

> Patrick is a White man about forty-five years old, bald with a grey stubble. He is wearing a casual suit with a luxury brown overcoat. As he starts his workshop, Patrick introduces himself as a husband and a father. Then, he says: "I am a White middle-aged man, and a VC [investor]." He asks the participants whether they think he is "diverse". Some shake their head, Anna says "No". He then takes a yarmulke out of his bag and places it on his head. He stays silent for a few seconds and looks around the room. He asks: "Am I diverse now?" Anna replies: "More diverse." Patrick stays again silent for a few seconds and asks the room: "What if I told you I was bisexual? Am I diverse now?" Anna replies again: "Yes, more diverse." The other participants make consenting noises.

This vignette includes articulations and even the "acting out" of particular identities (religious affiliation and sexuality) by Patrick, seemingly implying a shared experience between him and the participants. However, as I observed this interaction, it became clear that there were also significant differences in how Patrick, a White male, and the participants, women and/or people of colour, move through the world. Patrick enacts (putting on a yarmulke) and vocalises ("What if I told you I was bi-sexual?") his marginalised social identities, but these were unknown and unseen before he did so.

To conclude, perceptions of racialised and gendered bodies evoke invalidating comparisons between majority group stakeholders and racialised and gendered entrepreneurs. Sometimes, this manifests in majority stakeholders articulating disbelief about the adversity racialised and gendered entrepreneurs face in their entrepreneurship. Other times, majority group members imply or state that their experience is similar or the same to that of gendered and racialised entrepreneurs, despite not sharing similar visible identity markers.

Biased expectations, uncomfortable jokes, and invalidating comparisons emerge as inescapable constraints to legitimate identity attainment, prompting participants to engage in identity work responses such as diffusion (minimising or deflecting attention from somatic misalignment by downplaying discomfort) or assertion (actively challenging or reclaiming space). The next section further explores these dynamics.

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EIW responses to relational constraints on legitimate identity attainment

Recognising inescapability of constraints. In recognising the inescapability of the constraints they faced, participants reflect on how their awareness of these structural barriers deepened throughout their involvement in the accelerator programme. For instance, in her exit interview, Nisha shared:

> I did not realise fully how much I'm not being taken as seriously as other entrepreneurs. [. . .] If you're used to being treated a certain way, [. . .] sometimes you don't realise that it's happening to you. [. . .] It does create awareness for me that it is happening, and it is definitely happening to me as well.

Furthermore, participants often highlighted the perceived inescapability of racialised and gendered perceptions of their bodies. For instance, when trainer Alessandro asserts, "he did it, so it's possible," Anna disagrees with him in a conversation with James after he leaves. Referring to Alessandro as a "White Italian man," Anna notes, "they trust people that look like him," contrasting this with her own experience. She explains that, despite her efforts—"walking the walk and talking the talk"—she is still not seen as investable, emphasising the inescapability of her gendered identity markers.

Similarly, during a strategic sales workshop led by Simone, a Black American woman, serial entrepreneur, and current impact investor, she addresses the "burden" that marginalised founders are expected to bear in navigating these constraints:

> Sebie raised the question of whether it is necessary for them to go out of their way to make others feel comfortable. In response, Simone asserts that "society needs to change so we [marginalised founders] don't have to adapt," although she acknowledges that such change is not yet a reality. In the meantime, she encourages participants to "go in confident, find the right people, and speak up." Simone also says: "It's unfair we have to carry that burden."

This recognition of the inescapability of these constraints often manifests in participants' identity work responses, particularly through practices of diffusion, where they downplay discomfort or deflect attention from their somatic misalignment. The next section elaborates on these practices.

Diffusion. In some cases, participants engaged in practices of diffusion, where they downplayed discomfort or deflected attention from their embodied misalignment as a way to navigate the constraints they faced. For instance, Simone, who facilitated a workshop on strategic sales, explains that "women and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) need to make people feel comfortable," sharing her experience as a woman of colour: "Throughout my life, I have had to find ways to connect with people." In the same workshop, James reveals how the combination of his body size and Black skin colour complicates his client acquisition efforts, prompting him to engage in diffusing embodied identity work. He notes: "I am a very big, big Black man. I easily intimidate people without knowing. I need to disarm them, for instance by smiling a lot."

Similarly, trainers frequently emphasise that minority entrepreneurs must learn to "speak the language" of investors, reinforcing the need to conform to dominant cultural norms to gain legitimacy. For instance, during the welcome dinner on the first day of the programme, a facilitator advises participants that, during fundraising, "you will meet predominantly White males, and you need to understand how to talk to these people." Later, in a workshop on valuation, participants are again encouraged to "speak the same language" as potential investors to mitigate unconscious biases and better navigate the challenges of securing investment.

Finally, when uncomfortable jokes or remarks were made about participants' bodies—such as comments on how big of a guy James was or when Thomas jokingly remarked about not looking like an underrepresented founder—the most common response from all participants was to giggle or laugh. While, as an observer, I cannot definitively know whether these laughs were genuine responses to humour or a strategy to deflect from the awkwardness of the situation, they seem to serve as a way of diffusing potentially tense social interactions. This

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pattern of laughter further illustrates how participants engage in embodied identity work to manage the discomfort created by biased assumptions and perceptions of their bodies, reflecting the role of diffusion in navigating relational constraints to legitimacy.

While diffusion is the more common response to the relational constraints to legitimate identity attainment, some participants also engage in assertion—actively challenging or reclaiming space to regain their legitimacy. These practices are discussed in the next section.

Assertion. Assertion as an identity work response involves actively confronting or exposing biases, rather than accommodating or deflecting them. For example, Nisha challenged the trainers' assumptions by pointedly remarking, "I also speak Dutch, by the way", drawing attention to the subtle ways she was being othered. Similarly, Anna refused to accept Alessandro's individualising narrative during a workshop discussion: after Alessandro dismissed structural disadvantage by emphasising personal effort, Anna interrupted to point to statistics showing that only a small proportion of funding goes to underrepresented founders, reframing the issue as systemic rather than individual.

Yet, while assertion represents an effort to resist dominant expectations, its boundaries are shaped by the realities of structural power imbalances. During a Q&A with an experienced woman founder on day 4 of the programme, Anna asks her how to deal with prevention questions asked by investors, referring to a study that showed male entrepreneurs being asked promotion questions while female entrepreneurs receive prevention questions (Kanze *et al.*, 2018). The founder responds that when this would happen, she would "point it out and the investors get embarrassed." She continues to say that "the more you show them, the more aware they get of the biases they have." When Anna challenges this approach, stating that "this takes guts" and "there is always a power imbalance, you need them so you put with their shit", the founder seems to soften her statements. She says: "You have to be true to yourself, but you also need to compromise. I don't go in to fight bias, but to tell my story." Thus, while participants occasionally assert themselves, such practices are navigated carefully within a system where open resistance can come at a cost.

Finally, it is important to note that diffusion and assertion are not mutually exclusive identity work practices; rather, they often appear alongside each other in participants' interactions. For instance, when James joked about a woman investor "who dresses like a man," participants questioned his biased remark by referring to their own male-coded outfits, while at the same time laughing along. In doing so, they combined elements of both assertion and diffusion, simultaneously challenging and easing a potentially tense social situation.

Discussion

This study set out to understand how racialised and gendered perceptions of women and racial minority founders' bodies influence their identity work in entrepreneurial settings. Employing an embodied approach to EIW, the study revealed relational constraints on legitimate identity attainment—biased expectations, uncomfortable jokes, and invalidating comparisons—that prompted embodied identity work responses manifested through diffusion or assertion.

Together, these constraints signify how minority entrepreneurs have historically marginalised identities which are not only talked into being but also "written on the body" (Trethewey, 1999, p. 423), evoking prejudices and biases (Jammaers and Ybema, 2022). Here, a clear difference between visible identities—or identities marked on the body—and identities that may be marginalised yet not visible becomes apparent (Alcoff, 2006). The masculine Whiteness of Thomas', Alessandro's, and Patrick's bodies allows them to occupy a position of power, until they choose to articulate or enact specific social identities, such as sexuality, religious affiliation, or migration background (Puwar, 2004). In contrast, the racialised and/or gendered bodies of other participants are continually read through dominant norms, shaping their interactions and EIW responses. In conclusion, the analysis illustrates how legitimate entrepreneurial identity remains partially out of reach for marginalised entrepreneurs whose bodies are structurally marked as "other". This prompts ongoing,

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embodied attempts to navigate constraints without fully overcoming them (Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023; Oberstadt, 2021). This process is visualised in Figure 2.

The study makes three key contributions. First, it challenges dominant assumptions in existing conceptualisations of EIW by introducing an embodied perspective. Rather than simply extending discursive approaches, which centre language and individual agency, this study problematises the field's tendency to treat identity as something entrepreneurs can strategically construct, as long as they access the "right" discursive tools (Fournier and Grey, 2000). Such assumptions risk reinforcing a conceptualisation of entrepreneurship as a purely agentic and meritocratic endeavour, disconnected from the "real effects of social structures" that shape entrepreneurial life (Lee and Jones, 2015, p. 259; Watson, 2013; Martinez Dy, 2020). In contrast, an embodied approach to EIW—which contends that identity is constructed not only through discourse but also shaped by material and bodily experiences—shifts attention away from individual agency and toward the structural and relational forces that influence EIW (Kašperová *et al.*, 2018). This perspective highlights how identities are formed through individuals' interactions with the material and social world, underscoring that EIW is inherently relational and dependent on recognition and validation by others (Skovgaard-Smith *et al.*, 2020)—dynamics that are difficult to grasp when focusing solely on narrative construction.

Second, this study empirically advances research on entrepreneurship by marginalised groups. It demonstrates how somatic stereotype misalignment—entrepreneurs' bodily divergence from the White and male entrepreneur archetype—renders the body a particularly salient site of identity negotiation. For entrepreneurs in gendered or racialised bodies, embodied identity work emerges not as a general or optional process, but often as a compensatory response to relational constraints that block legitimate identity attainment (Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023). These insights contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how somatic norms and perceptions of the body shape entrepreneurial experiences. In doing so, the study underscores the need to move beyond individualistic or universalised models of EIW toward frameworks that account for the embodied, relational, and structural dimensions of marginalisation (Butler, 2009, 2015; Tyler, 2019).

The third contribution of this study is methodological. While most EIW research relies on discourse-oriented methodologies such as interviews and narrative analysis, this study employs ethnographic methods to capture rich, detailed accounts of the lived, embodied experiences of entrepreneurs in real-world interactions. By adopting this approach, the study addresses recent calls to move beyond examining the identity work of individual entrepreneurs and toward a deeper exploration of how EIW is shaped through interactions with others (Radu-Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021).

More broadly, this study seeks to inspire a shift in management and organisational studies by encouraging scholars to critically engage with the structural constraints and relational dynamics that shape professional identities, particularly for marginalised groups. A possible explanation for the disproportionate focus on discursive approaches, while neglecting relational ontologies, in existing literature lies in the "epistemic blindness" that pervades management and organisational theories as a whole (Banerjee, 2022, p. 1074). Echoing the

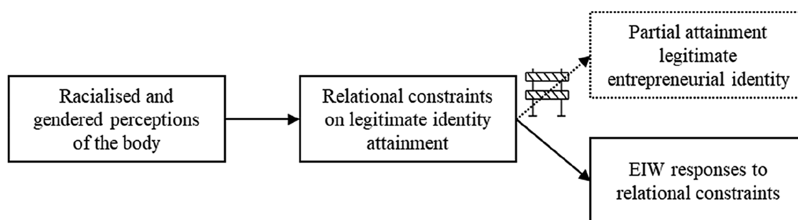

Figure 2. Embodied EIW process. Source: Author's own work

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White innocence observed in the empirical setting (Wekker, 2016), histories of race, racism, and colonialism are often ignored in theory generation, leading to an image of organisations as race-neutral bureaucracies (Banerjee, 2022; Ray, 2019). This exclusion of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour from the academic gaze perpetuates management theory primarily shaped by privileged perspectives, ascribing meaning to non-Western "Others" while failing to critically examine how gendered and racialised hierarchies are constructed and reproduced through everyday social interactions (Banerjee, 2022; Muzanenhamo and Chowdhury, 2023). While acknowledging the privilege and power of the author—a White woman working at an established university in Europe—this paper contributes to ongoing discussions about decolonising organisational theory by foregrounding the embodied, lived experiences of marginalised groups and analysing how systemic inequalities shape professional interactions and organisational structures.

The findings of this study also have practical implications for marginalised entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial support organisations (ESOs), and policymakers. First, raising awareness of relational constraints on legitimate identity attainment can help marginalised entrepreneurs better identify and navigate these barriers. Second, many ESOs, such as the organisation facilitating the accelerator programme in this study, primarily focus on teaching marginalised entrepreneurs strategies to overcome biases, rather than addressing how to cope with them. These programmes often emphasise learning how to "play the game" and "speak the language" dominant in entrepreneurial settings. However, focusing on "fitting in" can inadvertently reinforce structural inequalities, rather than challenge them (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2013). Instead, ESOs should recognise these systemic barriers and work to dismantle them—perhaps by adopting mentorship programmes that feature role models from diverse backgrounds and creating workshops that address structural inequalities, rather than simply teaching strategies to "fit in." Finally, government and private sector stakeholders should launch initiatives to increase the visibility of marginalised entrepreneurs, particularly women and people of colour, through media campaigns, conferences, and awards. These efforts would contribute to a more inclusive and diverse entrepreneurial ecosystem in the Netherlands, ultimately fostering innovation and economic growth.

This study has several limitations, and future research could explore these areas further to deepen understanding and expand on the findings. Three of these limitations are discussed below. First, while this study focuses on the lived experiences of entrepreneurs whose marginalised social identities (race and gender) are visibly demarcated, future research on embodied identity work could benefit from an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, exploring how visible identities such as race, gender, and age intersect with non-visible identities like sexuality, religious affiliation, or migration background could provide valuable insights. Additionally, studying these intersections in diverse contexts, particularly non-Western ones, would offer further merit. Related to this, the perspective on the gendering of bodies in this study is somewhat binary, focusing on the perception of bodies as either masculine or feminine. An intriguing avenue for future research would be to explore the embodied identity work of entrepreneurs who transcend the binary, such as entrepreneurs whose gender expression challenges binary norms or is read as ambiguous.

Second, this study identifies relational constraints on entrepreneurial legitimacy attainment and the compensatory responses to these constraints. However, the racialised and/or gendered body, along with how it is perceived, may also serve as an enabling factor in certain contexts. For example, during the growth marketing workshop, participants discuss how James can use his background as an underrepresented founder to gain access to more bigger clients, since established corporations regard diversity as an asset. As such, future research would benefit from uncovering the enabling as well as the constraining functions of outsiders' perceptions of racialised and gendered bodies in entrepreneurial settings.

Third, the findings hint at the notion of identity work being inherently relational. It is apparent therefore, that future research should refrain from studying identity work in a

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vacuum. Instead, using fine-grained descriptions of everyday interactions instead enables a more nuanced understanding of how identities are formed in relation to the "Other" in a variety of ways (Skovgaard-Smith *et al.*, 2020).

Notes

1. Prior to the jokes and remarks about James's larger body, I had already noted his physicality in my observations, thereby implicitly participating in the construction of his bodily difference. In my fieldnotes from the first day, I described James as a "big man", a descriptor I did not use for any of the other participants. This silent act of noticing and recording reflects how perceptions of bodily proportions are constructed and reproduced, even within my own ethnographic practice.

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Appendix

Table A1. Table with supportive data

Theme	Supportive data
Biased expectations	Nisha briefly mentions having trouble finding a job as a woman of colour. I react with: “O really?” And she says: “O yes, I can tell you lots of stories.” [fieldnotes day 1]
	Hazel explains that when you look at healthtech founders there are a lot of men. [. . .] She further explains that she sometimes feels as if she is not being taken seriously, for instance by investors. [fieldnotes day 1]
	Facilitator says that it is good to have a mix of male and female mentors. Because sometimes you need someone to say: “Get out of your own way.” But sometimes you need someone to just say “It’s okay.” She continues to say that female founders have to deal with imposter syndrome and sometimes need to get things out, whereas males experience shame very differently. [fieldnotes day 2]
	Anna explains she visited an event for Black founders. She says: “Not because I am Black, but I think it is important.” It was a remote event with many founders from the UK. She then says that she was impressed about the quality of their pitches and adds that “maybe it is in their culture.” I ask whether she means UK culture but she says: “No, Black founders. I think their storytelling is great, maybe because of their African heritage.” [fieldnotes day 2]
	Facilitator refers to an online talk where they discuss why women get less funding and that female founders get more questions about feasibility whereas men get questions about potential. [fieldnotes day 8]
	“I think mindset [. . .] is so important because if you don’t 100% believe in what you’re doing, no one else is going to. [. . .] And maybe, you know, as a female, people take me a little bit less seriously sometimes. So all of those things compound to sometimes chip away at your mindset.” [interview Hazel]
Uncomfortable jokes	Facilitator shows a slide about himself on which he shows all the flags of countries he has lived in. Sebie asks which country is his favourite. Facilitator pauses for a second before saying he thinks it is the Netherlands. Anna starts cheering quite loudly. [fieldnotes day 4]
	The facilitators start introducing themselves using slides as a visual tool, and Anna asks for their names because the slide they used to introduce themselves does not have their name on it, “only female entrepreneur”, Anna says and one of the facilitators starts laughing and says “I just noticed”, Anna continues to say “and I can see you’re both female.” [fieldnotes day 6]
	Anna asks the group to leave behind online reviews for her app. Sebie, who downloaded the app, says she received many e-mails from Thomas. I ask her who this is, and she says: “Anna’s co-founder.” I say “of course, I’ve met him!” and Sebie giggles and says “yeah, he was that White guy.” [fieldnotes day 7]
	Sebie mentions, in Dutch, “de hogeschool” [university of applied sciences] as one of her pilot partners during her introduction. The facilitator says: “You started with the one most difficult to pronounce!” and Sebie says: “Getting there!” [fieldnotes day 9]

(*continued*)

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Table A1. Continued

Theme	Supportive data
Invalidating comparisons	James says: "I'm not Dutch, not from the Netherlands, I don't speak Dutch" and offers this as a reason of him struggling attracting customers. [. . .] Another participant mentions that there were culture clashes when she hired an Egyptian engineer; she adds that she doesn't think it is about "looking like us" but about how to integrate in existing culture. [fieldnotes day 1]
	Anna asks whether the facilitator thinks that female or underrepresented founders accept lower offers. The facilitator takes a sip of her water, puts the glass down and pauses for a while. She then says "not really", and explains she thinks it is "a person thing." She says that she knows men that take a low offer as well. It is not just about negotiation, but about "getting in the room and click." [fieldnotes day 4]
	James says he is used to the Dutch atmosphere and wonders how to educate the ecosystem. Alessandro seems to disagree, he says that he hears this a lot from founders but he believes that if you have a good opportunity, money comes. He says it is about luck. [fieldnotes day 6]
	Anna shares an anecdote that she visited a women in tech events and her boyfriend making a remark saying "what if there was a White men in tech event?" Anna had replied to him: "Like all the other tech events?" [fieldnotes day 7]
	James describes his struggles with fundraising and the facilitator tells James says that "it can take long and the Netherlands is conservative, but it can also go really fast. You need to create urgency and momentum, that gives you credibility." Facilitator, who is a White male, says that when he first started, he also had no contacts. He came from an entrepreneurial family but in the South of the Netherlands: "Amsterdam was new for me." [fieldnotes day 7]
Recognising inescapability of constraints	Hazel says that she is lucky that her co-founder brings in some "male-ness." [fieldnotes day 1]
	Simone says that not engaging [with people who make your feel uncomfortable] is "a level of self-preservation" and that sometimes she avoids people who act in a certain way. She shares an anecdote of a guy who was helping her with an M&A process who said: "Of course they want you at events, you are a Black woman." She said she [. . .] did not want to talk to him after this. [fieldnotes day 7]
	Participant asks the facilitator what she expect will happen next in the market. Facilitator says that there is still funding, but it is less easy and it takes more time. She says that "it only changes for certain founders, White men just show up an get money." She says that for others, it was already hard and it will remain hard. She says that "for most of you, it wasn't easy before." [fieldnotes day 7]
	James says that he "and minority founders" are used to bootstrapping and they need to reach a certain point before raising, and this takes a long time. When is the right time to jump in? How do VCs analyse growth from bootstrapping? Facilitator replies that VCs are lazy and they don't make a distinction between these types of growth. She says that "she wishes it was different, but it's not." She suggests to find VCs that look differently. She says that "it is unfair, but that is the way it is." [fieldnotes day 7]
	"I think there was a level of just intimacy and honesty that was present from the start because no one was kind of putting on a facade. I think that was really due to the dynamics of the group and not having this same kind of competitive nature that maybe is present. If it is more male dominant, I'm not sure. [.] I just appreciate that there's there was also a level of understanding that maybe you do have to be very aware of how you're perceived and approach things a bit differently because of it." [interview Hazel]

(*continued*)

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Table A1. Continued

Theme	Supportive data
Diffusion	Facilitator seems to remember James and his start-up and asks: "Did you change your name?" James says that their initial aim was to change the narrative about Africa, and remove negative connotations about the word "black". [. . .] However, they received feedback from people that they should change their name [which was a play on words including the word "black"]. [. . .] James explains that his team is very diverse and their aim was not to come off as "angry black men and women." After the name change, business immediately started to pick up. [fieldnotes day 1]
	Facilitator says: "When you are a minority, prepare. If you are more prepared, you look confident." [fieldnotes day 4]
	James asks Anna whether she leverages her male co-founder and Anna says that "sometimes, they talk to him instead of me, and I'm like 'argh', but I try to let it slide off me." [fieldnotes day 6]
	Sebie asks: "Is it a good idea to go out of your way to make people feel comfortable?" And Simone replies: "No, but it is something I naturally did." [fieldnotes day 7]
Assertion	Facilitator continues to discuss network effects. He shows a picture of an investor meeting with all white males and he says that it is "good to talk about it." Facilitator says to "don't forget that they have big ego's": "Don't be over confident, but don't let them shit on you." [fieldnotes day 4]
	Facilitator says you have to try not to compromise too much of yourself because you have to do this a long time, and it is too long to keep faking it. She was told to be less invasive and lower her voice, and she thought: "What the fuck, this is me!" [fieldnotes day 4]
	Facilitator talk about body language and gestures during pitching. He says: "Do not copy a role model. As a founder, you are the role model. You are your God-given self." [fieldnotes day 5]
	After the interview has stopped with Nisha, she says "I am liking all women on LinkedIn. Not just entrepreneurs, all women. It's the awareness I was talking about." [fieldnotes day 9]
	"And if it [negative experiences] happens, I need to respond properly, right? And just kind of stand on my own and say, you know, that's not okay." [interview Nisha]

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